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## DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION STATE OF HAWAII

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## **Motorcycle Helmet Focus Group Findings**

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## **EXECUTIVE HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Focus Groups Conducted**
  - The first focus group included riders of BMWs, Harley-Davidsons, sports bikes, and dirt bikes, and a few riders never wore a helmet.
  - The second focus group consisted of mainly sports bike riders along with a few riders of cruising bikes. Each of the participants wore a helmet all of the time.
- **Reasons for Riding a Motorcycle**
  - A few of the reasons to ride included affordability, convenience, the feeling of independence, and through rebellion.
- **Rider Image**
  - The riders felt a sense of separation from others on the road.
  - Riders of cruisers and sports bikes made distinctions between the two rider cultures.
  - The characteristics of a typical Harley rider include the infrequent use of helmets.
  - Sports bikers were identified as speeders and the primary group of accident victims.
- **Accidents and Recognizing the Danger**
  - Many of the riders have been in an accident or had a close call.
  - The riders realized their possibilities of getting into an accident in the future.
  - Some riders took preventative measures and wore safety gear and helmets while others ignored their probability of getting into an accident and continued to ride without a helmet.
- **Riding Style and Other Drivers**
  - Most of the riders placed the blame of accidents on inattentive drivers who do not always see the motorcyclists.
  - The motorcyclists developed defensive riding styles in order to quickly react in a dangerous situation.
- **Safety Gear**
  - Not all of riders frequently wore a helmet or jacket.
  - The main arguments against safety gear were heat and the hassle of carrying it around.

- **Arguments Against Helmets**
  - Many of the issues revolved around the decrease in visibility and auditory senses, which limited their defensive riding abilities.
  - Other riders argued that helmets increase the likelihood of neck injuries, which could lead to paralysis.
  - There was no strong support for a mandatory helmet law between both groups.
- **Miscellaneous Concerns**
  - There has been an increase in motorcycle theft in recent years.
- **Proposed Safety Measures**
  - There were mixed responses with insurance reductions for those who wore helmets.
  - The riders that supported insurance reductions acknowledged the benefit directed to the riders, but others questioned problems that could arise if a rider under the plan got into an accident when not wearing a helmet.
- **Suggestions to Improve Rider Safety**
  - One of the recurring suggestions was graduated licensing, which received strong support from the participants.
  - Another suggestion that came out of the discussions was showing graphic images of the after effects of motorcycle accidents.
- **Education**
  - The riders wanted to improve education that covered more than what was offered in an owner's manual.
  - They favored the idea of having a training guide similar to the booklet available for the written section of a driver's examination.
  - Riders wanted education for drivers in order to increase awareness of motorcyclists on the roads.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Study Objectives**

SMS was commissioned by the Hawaii Department of Transportation to conduct a series of focus group discussions to gain a better understanding of traffic safety behaviors in the areas of extreme speeding, elderly pedestrians, motorcycle helmet usage, and seatbelt usage. The third round focus groups covered the topic of motorcycle helmet usage through discussions with motorcycle riders of all riding abilities and bike types. This phase of the DOT study will be integrated with research findings from earlier stages in order to develop a social marketing campaign that will change the behaviors of elderly pedestrians and drivers. The research objectives for this study were to determine:

- The reasons why they chose to ride a motorcycle
- The safety measures of the motorcycle riders with a focus on helmet usage
- The influential messages and suggested approaches that would encourage helmet usage

### **Methodology**

The participants in the focus groups were recruited based on each session's target group. The recruitment was conducted in motorcycle shops, in public parking lots, and at Raceway Park. An incentive of \$50.00 was offered during the recruiting. In addition, participants that arrived fifteen minutes early were eligible for a drawing to win an extra \$50.00.

Two sessions were held during evenings in January and December at SMS' in-house focus group facility. The focus groups were comprised of males and females riders of all bike types and riding experience.

The motorcycle helmet usage discussions were led by Hersh Singer, an experienced focus group moderator and the owner of SMS. Discussion guides were developed from the research objectives, which served as an outline for the main topics of each session. Additional areas were covered beyond the moderator's guide when undiscovered topics emerged.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Respondent Backgrounds

The first focus group included riders of BMWs, Harley-Davidsons, sports bikes, and dirt bikes. The group also included a few riders who never wore a helmet. The second round of discussion was comprised mainly of sports bike riders including a few riders of cruising bikes. Each of the participants in the second group said they wore a helmet all of the time. These rider's comments were italicized in order to differentiate their quotes from the first group of participants.

### Reasons for Riding a Motorcycle

The participants gave varying reasons as to why they chose to ride motorcycles. A few of them were influenced by the affordability and convenience for a mode of transportation. Others enjoyed the independence and freedom aspect of riding alone. A couple of the riders said they did it out of rebellion.

### Selected Comments

"Motorcycles were cheaper and more affordable versus buying a junk car."

"Price, gas, insurance are all cheaper. Parking is more convenient."

*"That's why I ride a bike, I either need to get there faster, parking, parking is definite, gas, gas right now is way too high."*

"Once you've ridden a motorcycle and understand the feeling, cars become somewhat irrelevant as a mode of transportation."

*"There's the cheetah in a cage and then there's the cheetah in the wild. They're both cheetahs, but the cheetah in the wild is a lot happier."*

*"The whole thing about maneuvering. You can't maneuver a car."*

*"I was always interested with things with wheels on it. When I was able to get something with a motor on it, I was there."*

"In Hawaii, we have sunny days and good weather. It's good to have the feeling of the wind blowing against you."

*"Freedom and the speed thing."*

"Freedom and independence is a big part of it."

"Independence was a big factor for me."

“Everything around you is gone.”

*“It’s the ultimate rebel without a cause.”*

*“Yeah, it’s the rebel thing. My parents said, not while you’re under my roof.”*

“It’s like being a modern cowboy. The relation of a cowboy and a horse.”

*“I ride for the thrill and fun.”*

## **Rider Image**

Many of the cruisers and sports bikers identified the image that differentiated themselves from other drivers as well as within the motorcycle riding community. Most of the riders had a sense of separation when compared to others on the road. In addition, the two groups explained how they have distinct images between each other. For instance, the riders pointed out the characteristics of a typical Harley rider, which included an infrequent usage of the helmet among many in the subculture. On the other side, the cruisers identified the sports bikers as speeders and pointed them out as the main group of accident victims.

### Selected Comments

“It separates you from everybody else.”

“It’s something that binds all riders together.”

“You get an incredible response from people.”

“Most of us got the bike for ourselves and not just to see other people’s reactions.”

“During the Toys for Tots Parade, there’s a good response from spectators.”

“There’s an image that comes with riding a Harley.”

*“You’re not going to be able to change that. Harley Davidson advertises and equips a huge number of riders. Granted they pulled in a large group of money laden clientele. They gotten some upper crust folks that want to ride their machines because it’s the in thing. They done a good job marketing wise, and that same marketing program by example generally is you don’t wear a helmet and you don’t wear full coverage protective gear. The image that they sell and the group you want to sell don’t do that.”*

*“To pin-point it on the Harley riders, they’re the ones that have been fighting legislation to not put a mandatory helmet law. They’re the ones that have the high paying jobs. If you can afford a Harley, you’re going to have doctors, lawyers, you know, people that can afford that bike. Those are the people that actually are fighting for a no helmet law.”*

*“I think some people [don’t wear a helmet] because there’s a lot of personal choice out there. There’s many cultures within the motorcycling community. You got some guys that won’t wear a helmet. They’ll wear chaps and a vest, but they’re probably not going to wear a shirt. They have enough skin hanging out. If they ever fall down, they’re going to end up being a donor. That’s their culture. If you put a helmet on one of those guys, then they’re going to get chided and ridiculed about wearing a helmet. It’s not in their culture to do that.”*

“Harley and BMW riders are cruisers. Sports bikes are different. They have a need for speed.”

*“Riding a sports bike properly is totally different from riding other bikes.”*

“I would venture to guess that if you took the last five years, it was the 18 to 25 year olds. Speed was probably an issue.”

“Harley riders have been riding for 20 to 30 years, so they’re more aware about safety, not these young kids on sports bikes.”

“Sports bikers identify with other professional riders and wear matching gear.”

“The reason why you see sports bikers with matching gear is because it’s available to them.”

## **Accidents and Recognizing the Danger**

Many of the riders have been in accidents and acknowledged the possibility of getting into an accident. By understanding the risks and having been in a accident, most of the riders started to wear a helmet and/or other safety gear. On the other hand, many of the riders ignored the likelihood of getting into an accident and continued riding unprotected.

### Selected Comments

“Once you see the wreckage, it gets more real.”

“It just makes you more aware, and you have to be more careful.”

*“I was witness to an accident in front of my high school. It was a motorcycle and a station wagon... The motorcycle guy hit the car and flipped over the car... The*

*motorcycle guy lost this part of his head. It wore down the top part down to his skull. That's not a good thing when you're getting out of school."*

"Me and most of my friends feel this way. If I am ever in an accident on my motorcycle, it's my own fault. Period."

*"I've been in an accident... Took a turn too hard and the bike slid out from under me. It was more my stupidity., I wasn't wearing a jacket or helmet. I was just wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Now, I wear a helmet and full leather."*

*"I pay attention more. I look what's ahead of me... I was riding with a helmet and a jacket when I got into the accident. I still do now."*

*"One of the riders I rode with was one of the more experienced guys, very capable, and was one of the guys that always went to the track and raced... A 68 or 70 year old Japanese gentlemen pulled his car off from a rice patty viaduct onto the side of the road... It was a 50 or 60 mile per hour zone... This individual ended up t-boning him right when the driver pulled on the road."*

*"I was sitting at a stoplight and was hit from behind in the middle of Waikiki."*

"When I was younger, I got into wrecks, and the helmet saved my face, but that didn't cause me to keep wearing a helmet."

"I started wearing a helmet after the accident... I've got two little kids, and I'm not indestructible. I want to be there for them."

"There are two kinds of bikers. Those that have been down, and those that are going down."

"[An accident] is going to happen. It's not worth giving up biking to worry about it."

*"I bet anyone that's been riding more than a year. Anyone of us have been close to an accident."*

"It doesn't take long to realize that motorcycles as a mode of transportation will get you killed."

"I have enough insurance to take care of [my family]."



## Riding Style and Other Drivers

Just about every rider points the blame of accidents to inattentive drivers who overlooked the motorcyclists. Therefore, they developed a defensive riding style while always being alert for other drivers on the road. Some of the sports bikers even felt that they were targeted by disgruntled motorists. A couple of the riders realized the motorcycle made it hard for other drivers to see since the size of the frame is relatively small compared to other cars that are easily spotted.

### Selected Comments

“You’re more aware and focused when going 50 miles per hour because you know it’s going to hurt when you fall.”

“You’re concentrating on the road and the bike. You’ve got to pay attention or you’ll get hurt.”

“As long as I’m not going down, whatever I’m doing, I must be doing it right.”

“All you do is fine tune the behavior you got working for you.”

“You don’t have to change your behavior for defensive driving when it’s some else’s fault.”

“I probably still won’t be on a motorcycle ten years from now, my reactions are slowing.”

“What you end up learning fairly quickly is defensive driving.”

*“You have to take action before they do.”*

“I can’t rely on people seeing me. I have to know what’s going on around me.”

“I always make sure I watch my rearview.”

*“I don’t think a week goes by without something happening. Someone will constantly make a left turn into you. I see it coming... Constantly, you have to be aware of everything around you.”*

*“The driver’s here either don’t care or don’t look.”*

*“They just move in your lane and get right next to you. They even look right at you.”*

*“When they see a group of bikers, they want to cause trouble. They want to see what we would do... The drivers cut you off.”*

*“Normally it’s a sport bike thing. The cruisers, they’ll leave you alone.”*

*“A lot of it comes down to visibility. When you’re in a car, there’s a piece of car or a bumper in their view. On a bike, you could be right next to a car, and he doesn’t see a flat surface area of a hood kind of thing. He might be looking at the front of the top bubble on a sport bike or your forearm, but that’s not a big enough object to get his attention.”*

*“They look around you for something that can hurt them. I never think they do it intentionally. They’re looking around me. I’ve got to act like no one can see me.”*

*“They can’t tell how fast a bike is coming at you.”*

*“That’s the excuse of drivers use all of the time, ‘I didn’t see them.’”*

## **Safety Gear**

Not all of the riders wore safety gear such as a helmet or jacket on a regular basis. The first group of bikers was split down the middle between those who wore any sort of protection versus those who did not. The second group recognized the importance of the safety gear and each one of them always wore a helmet in addition to a jacket and/or gloves. Of those who did not wear the extra protection, many gave the excuse of heat and the hassle it is to carry around.

## **Selected Comments**

*“A lot of stuff you wear is for protection.”*

*“I didn’t use to when I was younger. I started wearing a helmet when I got a little more sense, late 20s early 30s. A lot of people I knew were getting smashed and not wearing a helmet. A lot of people died from not wearing a helmet. I know a lot of people that died that way.”*

*“I’ve always worn a helmet from day one.”*

*“I wear my helmet when I move my bike out of the driveway to wash it.”*

*“I think it’s odd that we got a whole group that wears a helmet. I’d say probably 50% or more wear a helmet.”*

*“Now I wear a jacket. Before my accident, I never did. I had road rash, and I did not want to go through that again because that’s a lot of pain and suffering.”*

“If I’m on the freeway, I usually wear a helmet. If I’m cruising around town, I wear glasses.”

“There’re instances where everybody would wear a helmet.”

“I feel for the most part that a helmet will help you, but I still don’t always wear a helmet.”

*“I work in the parts department, so I sell helmets. I see guys all the time with their helmet strapped onto the side of the bike... Because they think they’re cool.”*

“Everybody in the family [encourages helmets usage], and it doesn’t influence me.”

“It all depends on what type of riding I’m doing. If I’m out cruising, then I don’t wear a helmet. If I know I’m going to do a lot of freeway riding, I’ll put my helmet on for sure.”

“If I was driving in traffic, I would leave my helmet at home.”

“If I wear a helmet I don’t wear a half shell, I wear a full face. Why would I only want half of the protection?”

“Many of us started riding in the 60s. There were no helmet laws. It was hard to find a helmet back then, not like it is today.”

“I wear my helmet everyday except for Toys for Tots.”

“My main concern is my head, so I never spend the money on gloves or a jacket.”

“That’s why you wear a bandana, for the protection from bugs.”

“On the freeway, [helmets] protect you from the wind, bugs... It’s not always about safety issues.”

“The weather isn’t very conducive for a leather jacket and a helmet in Hawaii. This is a unique riding environment. If it’s cold, that jacket and helmet feel good. Over here, a t-shirt is all you really need.”

*“I have a nice leather jacket, but when I got here, it was too hot to wear it. I did pick up a nice mesh jacket that has all of the body armor, so it’s still a very protective jacket.”*

“If I’m going to Waikiki and have to leave the bike and walk, I don’t wear any gear. If I’m going somewhere, like to see friends, then I definitely wear a jacket and helmet.”

## Arguments Against Helmets

The first focus group with predominantly older riders who rode Harleys or BMWs represented the majority of the arguments against helmets. Many of their reasons revolved around the decrease in visibility and auditory senses, which limited their defensive driving abilities. Other riders argued about the dangers the helmet could cause during an accident such as neck injuries that lead to paralysis. Also, despite the fact that each of the second focus group's riders always wore their helmet, there was no strong support for a mandatory helmet law. Most of them favored the freedom of choice.

### Selected Comments

*"It's hot."*

*"They think it's going to mess up their hair."*

*"Yeah, they don't want to get helmet head."*

*"Helmets are expensive, so they probably can't afford it."*

*"You're less likely to hit your head at low speeds."*

*"There are some people that are going to think, 'I'm not really going to be going that fast,' and they don't want to spend money on a helmet because they think they're not going to need it."*

*"Some of them are the same people that won't wear seatbelts in a car."*

*"[Helmets with] DOT certification. That's a drop off from a ten foot latter."*

*"You're wearing a ten pound helmet. You got ten more pounds on your head that keeps going. They call it inertia."*

*"Helmets are really hard on your neck."*

*"Wind resistance changes with a helmet."*

*"The helmet will give you a nice open casket."*

*"Helmets can make you quadriplegic."*

*"I would rather die than be a quadriplegic."*

*"I feel with the helmet on, you lose a lot of sound."*

“The helmet is not helpful for the defensive driving aspect of it. All your sense are cut down. Your vision and hearing is cut down.”

“You start relying on your mirror when you wear a helmet.”

“Isolation, you’re isolated from everything when you wear a helmet.”

“Cutting down a little bit of each of my sense makes me more nervous.”

“It’s a hindrance for safety.”

“If cops had the choice to wear a half-shell helmet, they wouldn’t be wearing them.”

“If I was forced to wear a helmet, I would cut down on my riding.”

“The concept of whether I wear a helmet or not is nobody’s business.”

“Americans are concerned with freedom of choice.”

“Definitely, it’s nice to have a choice.”

“A lot of the parents that said a helmet law was a good idea didn’t realize it would apply to them someday.”

“The only people that care if we don’t wear helmets are the people that don’t ride.”

*“It’s being legislated by people who don’t understand.”*

*“I opposed it last time it came out.”*

*“It’s their choice, it’s their freedom. If they want to go ahead to ride without a helmet or ride without their safety gear; if they want to ride in slippers and shorts, then they deserve what will happen.”*

*“Basically, I’m all for weeding them out of society anyway. I’m not responsible for them.”*

*“If you try to force somebody to do something, they’ll probably want to do the opposite more.”*

*“I’m open to having a helmet or no helmet.”*

*“At certain point the bureaucracy of legislative normalities is difficult for me to accept.”*

*“I’m not willing to say that the law says you’ve got to wear a helmet, and I’m not willing to say that the law says you can’t wear a helmet. I think we should have a choice whether we wear a helmet or not.”*

*“Encourage them, but don’t make it mandatory.”*

## **Miscellaneous Concerns**

A few concerns were brought up during the focus group relating to motorcycle theft. Many of the riders said there has been an increase in theft in recent years and went on to explain various incidents.

### Selected Comments

*“There’s a ring of guys right now going around stealing bikes. I had a friend of mine that just got accosted on the side of the road. They told him to pull over. They actually pulled him over, and he got away. They had two vans that just blocked him in and made him pull over.”*

*“For an island, it’s really odd, but we have one of the worst stolen motorcycle rates.”*

*“Dole theaters, your bike will guaranteed get stolen there. Guaranteed.”*

*“If they can get it running, then they run it until it runs dry. They flail it for every mile of gas it has to go. When get done with it, they’ll just shove it into a ditch. When you’re not lucky, they just set it on fire.”*

## **Proposed Safety Measures**

The moderator presented a few safety measures that could be used to encourage helmet usage. There were mixed responses with insurance reductions, but those in favor said it might work because the riders could benefit. One of the riders that was skeptical of the insurance reduction questioned if their would be an adverse affect if a rider was covered, but was not wearing a helmet at the time of an accident.

### Selected Comments

#### Insurance Reductions

*“I would take the extra money and buy a helmet. Then I’d wear it when I wanted to.”*

*“I would see some backlash, ‘Oh, you weren’t wearing a helmet, so you’re not covered.”*

“Safety courses should come with a discount on insurance.”

*“Give them insurance incentives.”*

*“The only way people would take initiative to do something is if we benefit from it. Yes, you get the benefit that you’re going to live, but they can’t see that. They want to see something that like, ‘Oh, we’re going to knock off \$80 from your insurance policy.’”*

*“I pay for everybody’s stupidity and mistakes right now.”*

**\*\*Moderator:** “What if we use the argument that those people that pay insurance and wear helmets support the 70% or so non-responsible riders. If the prices of the insurance companies were adjusted properly, you guys that wear helmets and equipment your rates will go way down because you’ve been supporting them for now. Increase their by 500 or 1000 and take yours down by 500 or 1000.”

#### One-Third Fatality Reduction with a Helmet

“Only if that was a true statistic.”

“Whether or not you could convince me that was a real statistic, it wouldn’t matter.”

“My theory is that I’m part of the two-thirds.”

“Are you going to include a quadriplegic being alive or a cripple being alive? Then no.”

### **Suggestions to Improve Rider Safety**

The participants provided a number of suggestions to that would ensure rider safety. One of the recurring ideas was to have a graduated license, similar to what is implemented in Japan. This would regulate the size of motorcycle that could be legally ridden based on the rider’s experience level. Others suggestions to influence behavior included showing them gory images of crash victims or challenging them to something such as running and sliding on concrete without a leather jacket on.

## Selected Comments

“Implement something like Japan has... You have to get a license for certain size bikes.”

“[Graduated licensing] would keep immature riders off a high performance machine.”

*“I think [graduated licensing] would make a huge impact in the experience level and the differential in their experience level and the performance of the vehicle.”*

*“In Japan, you’re first license is for 50 cc and below, basically scooters. Then after a period of time, you can apply for a 125 or below.”*

*“For [graduated licensing] you would have to test, for the lowest level bike, which would be for about a 250 or below. In our market, bikes are generally 500 to 600 CCs. There are basic levels of achievement. There are basic riders license, and you ride with that license for about a year under a suspension kind of basis... You take the test on the course, which is a closed course. Then you should be able to ride on the street.”*

*“When I was in Japan, and involved with 15 riders on the base... Myself and the MFS instructor were the most senior guys in the group. I think the best thing we did in that group is coach the younger riders to ride within their means. We tried to give them constructive criticism and help them out. We would go out and ride with them.”*

*“Give them testimonials from people who have survived a crash at 50 without a helmet.”*

*“To encourage motorcycle safety and to encourage more drivers to pay attention, more motorcycle riders should be wearing proper safety equipment, so they’re better recognized if they do get into an accident. If they have a helmet on, then motorcycle riders have a leg to stand on and say, ‘Hey, look what y’all are doing.’ The ones that don’t wear helmets set bad examples. I bet statistically, a lot of people die because of no helmets. That takes away from us to stand up and say, ‘Hey.’ You know, the drivers come back and say, ‘Hey, this guy died because he didn’t have a helmet on. That’s why he died.’ Cars hit cars everyday, but it’s more traumatic to hit a bike, so if everyone wears the proper safety equipment, then they can go after drivers and say, ‘Hey, ya’ll need to be doing this and that because people are getting hurt.’”*

*“Most people don’t appreciate and don’t believe how easily they can injure themselves and how drastic those injuries would be. A good example is the idea that you get on a motorcycle without a helmet and without a jacket and everything*



*else like that, and you're going to drive around town in 30 mile per hour zones. People don't think you can go fast enough to hurt themselves... I challenge people, I got leather jacket that I got on everyday and I'll run as fast as I can across this parking lot, and you're running as fast as you can. Then we'll dive fast first into the ground. You're wearing your t-shirt, and I'm wearing my leather jacket. I bet you, we can't run more than eight or nine miles an hour. That's like when you let the clutch out on the bike. I bet you that you will not get up and be as good as shape as I am. Most people won't take you on that challenge, and yet they'll get on a motorcycle and do 50 miles down highway and thinking that they're ok."*

*"Some people don't have the impetus to observe those safeties, you can tell them, you can show them, you can give them, you can do whatever you want, but they're still not going to use it."*

*"The gore factor. Show them and up close and personal experience of what happens."*

## **Education**

The riders of both groups showed interest in improving education for new riders. They would like more in-depth information beyond what is provided in an owner's manual. They favored the idea of a training booklet similar to the guide available to study for the written exam to obtain a driver's license.

The riders also felt that education for drivers was equally important. The purpose of the education would be to increase their awareness and respect for motorcyclists. This form of education would be through drivers ed courses in school or providing reminders to older individuals.

### Selected Comments

#### Riders

*"Make education to get a motorcycle more accessible and more thorough."*

*"Let them buy a book about motorcycle education. Right now, you can't get a book."*

*"The internet if full of information."*

*"Yeah, there's a lot of stuff on the internet, but people won't be interested in that."*

*“What you have a hard time doing, for a new rider, someone new to the sport, is translate what they read in how they operate the vehicle. You really need something hands on.”*

*“The operators manual, it’s really basic.”*

### Drivers

*“The current situation in Hawaii you have to be 16 and driving six months minimum. What these driver education programs do is only teach road safety with other cars. They only touch upon motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians. They haven’t stressed the importance that there are two wheel vehicles that could go faster than you... There isn’t enough stress with these kids in class telling them this is what you have to be on the lookout for.”*

*“In Hawaii, you don’t even need to be able to read to get a license, so we got people out there that can’t take the written test and have to take the oral test who can’t read the signs. They can’t get a license.”*

*“The older ones especially, they tend to get forgetful about what you need to be doing and looking around.”*